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A PLACE CALLED HOME; BOYS' HOME CLOSING Leaders say the mission is not lost, even as the agency shutters its residential facilities that have sheltered troubled children since 1914.

BYLINE: PAUL PINKHAM**SECTION:** Pg. A-1**LENGTH:** 698 words

After sheltering troubled children for 94 years, Jacksonville's venerable Boys' Home is closing its residential facility for good Monday.

While the Arlington agency will continue to provide other services in the foster-care arena, the decision to shutter its group home resulted from the dwindling number of children in the state's revamped foster-care system, said Kathy Brown, executive vice president of the Boys' Home Association.

At its apex, Boys' Home housed 87 children in the 1970s and '80s, Brown said. Last year there were about 15 and currently there are just four.

"The need for large group homes like ours has decreased," Brown said. "We should applaud that. The fact that fewer children are being placed in foster care and that more services are provided to keep them in their homes is a good thing."

In October 2007, there were 3,200 Jacksonville children under dependency court supervision, according to Family Support Services, which oversees foster care in Duval and Nassau counties. A year later, that number was nearly cut in half to 1,870, the result of a concerted effort by the state Department of Children and Families to keep families together whenever possible.

Nancy Dreicer, the department's Northeast Florida regional director, said the department has emphasized providing services to families in trouble over removing children and has sought to expedite adoptions in cases where children must be removed.

"It's all about permanency," she said. "Keeping the kids with their family is our No. 1 priority."

The lower numbers mean the closure won't put a strain on the system, said Jim Adams, executive director of Family Support Services. Still, he said he hates to see the home go.

"Any time you lose a quality facility like Boys' Home, it's a big deal," Adams said. "They are an institution that served this community for a long time ... Foster care is in redesign. This is a casualty."

Boys' Home opened in 1914 as a group home for homeless and orphaned boys. A Foster Home Program for children removed from their families because of abuse or neglect was added later and began accepting girls in 1997.

Since it opened, more than 10,000 children have been served at the facility near Jacksonville University.

Circuit Judge David Gooding remembers visiting the facility as a boy with his father, the late Circuit Judge Marion Gooding.

"They certainly contributed greatly, securing the future of children for decades," Gooding said.

Henry Thomas, 64, of Whitehouse, has fond memories of the time he spent at the Boys' Home in the late 1950s and early '60s. He said the superintendent at the time was like a father to him.

"He taught me a lot," said Thomas, retired from the phone company. "It gave me stability to want to be successful."

His brother, Hubert, had mixed reviews. He remembered good times, like playing ball and

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making friends, but he also recalled working hard to clear trees from the site.

"They taught us work ethics. You had to go out and work," said Hubert Thomas, 62, of Clay Hill. "If you worked hard all week, you got to go to the movies on Friday night. I didn't go to too many movies."

He said he missed his mother and would hide behind bushes at the Boys' Home entrance week after week, waiting for her to visit. And he said discipline was tough, including one man who would make the boys dig a grave-size hole then drop a numbered matchstick in it. The boys would then have to refill the whole, then dig it again until they found the match.

"I dug many of them. Some of them I deserved," said Hubert Thomas, retired from the federal government.

Gooding said Monday's closure didn't come as a surprise. He said Boys' Home officials recently have requested that children be removed from its facilities and placed elsewhere.

Brown said the group home hasn't been the largest program at Boys' Home for several years. She said the agency plans to remain viable with programs in foster-home training, clinical services, case management and therapeutic care. They will use the existing property for those programs, she said.

"We have a lot of things to offer," she said. "We are looking forward to continuing our mission."

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GRAPHIC: Photo

MID-1950s: Henry (fourth from left) and Hubert

Thomas (sixth from left) Photo provided by Hubert Thomas Hubert Thomas puts on his baseball uniform for a photographer who visited the Boys' Home in the 1950s. The Boys' Home will be shutting its residential facilities. The agency has served more than 10,000 children at its location near Jacksonville University. JOHN PEMBERTON/The Times-Union
MEMORIES OF HOME A photo on the wall shows the three brothers - Hubert, Henry and Harley Thomas - in the Boys' Home in Arlington. Hubert and Henry both recalled some good times in their stay. They also remember an adult, Fred Borg, making sure they did the right thing during their time there.

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